

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

ALICE GROSS

AUGUST 16, 1991

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY JIM WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY #1991-21

This transcript corresponds to audiotapes DAV-AR #4365-4367

HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



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ABSTRACT

Alice Gross worked for Bess W. Truman as a personal care assistant from June 1978 to August 1980. She spent the night shift in the Truman home and provides details about Truman's evening routine and the other people who worked in the home at the time. Gross also discusses birthday parties that the staff held for Bess Truman and her impressions of and relationship with the former first lady.

Persons mentioned: Henry Bundschu, Harry S Truman, Bess W. Truman, Margaret Truman Daniel, Ginger Rogers, Valeria LaMare Herman T. Pikert, Richard M. Nixon, E. Clifton Daniel, Jr., Harriet Allen Kellogg Thomas, Pat Harvey, Edward Hobby, Marge O'Hallen, Geraldine Peterson, Thomas Washington Daniel, Grandma Moses, Winston Churchill, Jimmy Carter, May Wallace, Betty Buckingham, Mary "Peaches" Leutzing, and Robert E. Lockwood.

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JIM WILLIAMS: This is an oral history interview with Alice Gross. We're at her house in Independence, Missouri, on August 16, 1991. The interviewer is Jim Williams from the National Park Service, and Connie Odum-Soper is running the recording equipment. She's from the National Park Service also. And Mr. Gross is here, too.

First of all, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Are you a native of Independence?

ALICE GROSS: No, I'm originally from Arkansas. Calico Rock, Arkansas. I came to Independence when I was fifteen. I was married then, and have lived in Independence most of the time since then. I moved away a couple times but moved back.

WILLIAMS: You said Calico Rock?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Where is that in Arkansas?

GROSS: It's about twenty-five miles from Mountain Home, Arkansas, where it's now quite popular with retired people.

WILLIAMS: What brought you to Independence, and when was that exactly?

GROSS: My grandmother lived here, and the man I married, my kids' father, lived here at the time, and that's why I came to Independence. I've been here, like I said . . . I moved away and was gone about eight months, and then we came back.

WILLIAMS: What did you know about the Trumans at that time?

GROSS: My grandmother served dinner to Mr. Truman one time at Judge Bundschu's. She worked for Judge Bundschu, and it was his birthday, and they had . . . My grandmother cooked for him, so she fixed the dinner and served Mr. and Mrs. Truman at the birthday dinner, and they came into the kitchen and

thanked her for the meal. It amazed me that years later I got called to go to work for her.

WILLIAMS: Do you have any idea about what year that was?

GROSS: Let's see, I came to Independence in 1954. She'd been working for Mr. Bundschu in '50, '51, '52, and she worked for him several years, till she passed away.

WILLIAMS: And this was Judge Henry Bundschu?

GROSS: Judge Bundschu.

WILLIAMS: And was the dinner right there at the Bundschu house on Maple?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: So, of course, if you moved here in '54, you were familiar with the Trumans then.

GROSS: Yes, I sure was.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever see the Trumans in Independence?

GROSS: I had never seen the Trumans until about 1960 or '62 when Ginger Rogers came to town, and I went up on the square to see her and Mr. Truman. I was standing in line, and they both passed right by me, and I got to see them real well. And that was the first time I'd ever seen Mr. Truman in person, or Ginger Rogers.

WILLIAMS: Did you see him other times besides that?

GROSS: No, I really didn't.

WILLIAMS: And what is your profession?

GROSS: My profession, I'm a nurse aide. I have been the home service coordinator for Kensington Care Services, sending helpers into the home, until July of last year. I am now an on-call person, where I'll fill in at the office for others.

WILLIAMS: And where did you go to school?

GROSS: Calico Rock, Arkansas, high school. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: What training is involved to be a nurse's aide?

GROSS: My training was on-the-job training. I had training at Truman East when I started into nursing. My very first training was in a nursing home in Liberty, Missouri. Mrs. Hatfield trained me in a private nursing home, and then I went out to Truman East and got more training, quite a bit more training. I've also worked as a dental assistant and had training in dental assistance and physical therapy.

WILLIAMS: What was your association with Bess Truman?

GROSS: I was her companion at night, to help her, to fix her meals; and then when I got married I went in and relieved people. At one time, when Mrs. LaMere had broken her leg, I filled in day and night.

WILLIAMS: When did you begin work there?

GROSS: I was trying to think today. It was either May or June of 1978 that I went to work for her.

WILLIAMS: And how did you get the job?

GROSS: They called me about eleven o'clock one night, Mrs. LaMere did, and asked me if I was interested in going to work for Mrs. Truman. And I said, well . . . I had two other jobs. I had two other day jobs, and I said I wanted to pray about it. So I got off the phone, and I called my pastor and talked to him, because that would really commit me to working all the time, and he said, "Well, Alice, I think it would be great. If you don't care to do that, you can always quit." And so I called her back and told her I would be interested in going. Then they set up an interview with Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: Do you know how she got your name?

GROSS: Through Mrs. LaMere. Mrs. LaMere's deceased husband baptized me, and they were friends.

WILLIAMS: So you knew Valeria LaMere before?

GROSS: Yes, I sure did.

WILLIAMS: And you said you had an interview with Mrs. Truman?

GROSS: Yes, I did. I had to go and be interviewed. It was pouring down rain. I was soaking wet by the time I got into the house, even though I had an umbrella, and interviewed with her and told her I'd be interested in the job. She talked to me about salary and when I would work. I worked from 7:30 at night until 7:00 in the morning. I stayed with her and took care of her personal care. I had some beautiful experiences with her.

WILLIAMS: What kind of questions did she ask you in the interview?

GROSS: Really, mainly would it bother me working those hours, and how often could I work. I told her I would work every night but one night a week, and I would prefer not to work on Wednesday night because I went to church on Wednesday night. We talked about salary, and we agreed on the amount, and that was about it.

WILLIAMS: Were you paid by the hour?

GROSS: I was paid so much a week.

WILLIAMS: Was it a pretty good wage compared to other jobs you'd had?

GROSS: Uh . . .

WILLIAMS: I was trying to get around asking you precisely, but you don't have to answer any of these questions.

GROSS: It was all right for the time. It filled the need I had. I had two other jobs, so it filled the need.

WILLIAMS: Did you get the impression that Mrs. Truman was in charge?

GROSS: Yes, Mrs. Truman was in charge. She knew what was going on. In fact, she gave my husband a blank check to go get the air conditioner that's in the library now, when the air conditioner went out. She trusted him that much that she just signed a check and gave it to him and had him go out and buy the air

conditioner for her.

WILLIAMS: What was his name?

GROSS: Herman T. Pikert. He went by Ted.

WILLIAMS: Can you spell Pikert?

GROSS: It's P-I-K-E-R-T. The nice thing about that was that Ted had delivered mail to Mr. and Mrs. Truman when he was a postman.

WILLIAMS: Oh, really?

GROSS: Yes, before we were married, several years before, and so it was a thrill for him. He was quite a Truman fan. In fact, I was going through some things last night, and I have a folder just full of history of Mr. Truman, things that he had collected about Mr. Truman, and photos and things. Joe found them last night, and we were going through them, and he was reading to me as I was working around the house. Can you turn it off a minute?

WILLIAMS: We can stop. [tape turned off] So you were talking about your husband had delivered mail.

GROSS: Yes, he delivered mail and had delivered a package to Mrs. Truman. And it was funny, when I went to work for Mrs. Truman, I wasn't married at the time. I met Ted the 30th of August, the same year I started to work for Mrs. Truman, and five days later he proposed to me. I was really scared to show Mrs. Truman my ring. Don, the Secret Service that passed away with Nixon, he was Secret Service and had been with Mr. and Mrs. Truman for quite a while. He used to come over at night. When I would get her to bed and prepared for the night, I would go out to the inner foyer and turn the light on to signal to the Secret Service that I was going upstairs. Then Don would come over and we'd watch television, and we'd talk. He'd tell me lots of things about Mrs. Truman and how they used to have breakfast. She'd fix breakfast for him, you know.

And he told me about the Madonna. It's not in the house now, because I have been on a tour since then. They had a madonna that was a mother and baby in gold. He said that the Madonna was out of a monastery in Russia. Now, he didn't tell me that. The only time that I met Mr. Daniel, I heard him telling his son that the Madonna came from a Russian monastery. That's how come I knew where it came from. But Don said at the time that it should really be preserved, because it would deteriorate if it was kept out in the open like that. I had lots of good times with Don. He was to come back for my wedding, but he had a heart attack and died on Tuesday before our wedding on Saturday.

WILLIAMS: What was his last name?

GROSS: I don't remember. I don't remember, really.

WILLIAMS: And he had been transferred to another job?

GROSS: He had gone out to be with Nixon just for a week and was to come back, because he had a home down by Oak Grove. He'd been with the Trumans for quite a while.

WILLIAMS: So Mrs. Truman approved you, and you began work. What was the routine every day?

GROSS: The routine was that I'd come in the evening and I'd fix her dinner for her. Let me back up there. When I first started I wouldn't fix her dinner, because the girls would already have her dinner over with because I'd start at 7:00. But I'd come in and I'd spend time talking with her. We'd visit. I remember one time I sat at her feet, and we talked, and I kind of told her a little bit about my life. As we got ready to get up to take her to her bedroom, I said, "Well, I'm sorry I gabbed so much." She said, "No, I really appreciate and feel good that you had confidence in talking with me about yourself." We had lots of good visits. It was just shortly after I started there that she had to go into

the hospital. She got where she couldn't walk, and then she mainly stayed in her bedroom after that, because it was too hard for her to get around. We'd have to assist her.

WILLIAMS: Were you the only one then working at nights?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Who would work in the daytime, do you know?

GROSS: Mrs. LaMere. When I quit being there at night, and got married and wanted to just fill in when people weren't there, they brought in Mrs. . . . oh my, an LPN, but I can't remember her name, . . . Harriet?

WILLIAMS: Allen?

GROSS: Allen, Harriet Allen.

WILLIAMS: I've heard that name.

GROSS: Yes, thank you. Harriet Allen. I don't know how long she was there. She had quite a few nurses go through there, she really did. Like I said, when she broke her hip, when Mrs. LaMere broke her leg or ankle, I can't remember which one, I went over and stayed with her around the clock.

I remember one night she said, "Why don't Ted come and have supper with us?" He was real shy about that, but he did come that one night and have supper with us. I fixed the formal dining room, and got place mats out of the china closet and fixed it up real pretty, and fixed dinner for us and brought her in. And I remember her looking at that and said, "Oh, where'd these come from?" I said, "Well, they came from your buffet. You know, they're yours." And we had a lovely dinner. I couldn't get him to come back again. When we got married, she had all of our wedding party, and my husband's father and his stepmother and her sister-in-law and my kids, my aunt and uncle. She was unable to attend the wedding, so she wanted to be a part of it, so she had them come in and meet her. Like I said, she sent us a

silver tray for a wedding gift.

WILLIAMS: Could you read what it says on there?

GROSS: I have to get my glasses. It says, "A wedding gift from Mrs. Harry S Truman to Ted and Alice Pikert, November 10, 1978." And it's a gallery tray. She had it sent to us through the mail because . . . She didn't want to present the gift to me, so she had it sent to our home. One time Reverend was ill. He'd had surgery and wasn't able to do the yard work, and she asked me to find someone. And I had my great-uncle, who is really into flowers and gardening and stuff, come over and do the yard work for her. Like I said, I had some beautiful times with her. I did a lot of handwork. She was always, always interested in my family, my children and what they were doing. I did a lot of crocheting and a lot of handwork, and she was always interested . . . She always liked to talk about her grandchildren. They meant a lot to her. In her bedroom, I don't know if it's still there, but she had a 5-by-7 picture of Ted and me . . . a wedding picture of us. It always sat with her kids up on the mantel. But like I said, I wasn't there at the end, and so I don't know where things went. They called and asked me if I wanted anything. I said, "No, I gave them as a gift, and I don't want them back, you know." So I don't know what they did with the things. I often wondered if the picture was still there or what happened to the quilt and things like that.

WILLIAMS: Is it a colored picture?

GROSS: Uh-huh, in my wedding gown and his white dinner jacket.

WILLIAMS: I'll have to look for that. If we have it, we've probably been puzzled about who it was. [chuckling]

GROSS: Also, while I was there one day, I came and she said, "Alice, I want you to read this." And she handed me a letter, and it was from a schoolteacher in Blue Springs. The kids and the schoolteacher had written, and they were

asking her a lot of questions, and they asked at the end, “And by the way, does Alice Cook still work for you?” And Mrs. Truman sent it, and the secretary answered the letter. And when she brought it back, she said, “I want you to read this before they mailed it back to the teacher.” And she answered the question. She said, “Yes, Alice Cook still works for us, but her name is now Pikert because she’s married.” The teacher happened to be a friend of mine that I hadn’t seen in a long time who sent the letter. And recently she called and asked me to write a book of my experiences. She said she would write and help me, but I didn’t want to do that. I just . . . I’m not into books. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: How often would you get paid?

GROSS: Every week. Weekly.

WILLIAMS: And who signed the check?

GROSS: Mrs. Truman. And I have copies of them but, I didn’t have time to find them for you. But I do have copies of them. And I wish now I had kept one check. But I did make copies because I do have her signature on copies.

WILLIAMS: It’s probably worth more now than the money that . . .

GROSS: Yes. Yes, I really wish I had kept one. I had worked there about a week or two, and I came in one night and this painting was sitting on her floor, the original painting the artist had sent over for her to sign. And so we got a copy. We got two. And I took them in, and Mrs. Truman signed them. And we sent one to my husband’s father in Florida. And then we went up to have this one framed, and the man that framed it asked the artist to come in and re-sign it. So he told us when we were through we had a valuable painting now.

WILLIAMS: Do you know who the artist is?

GROSS: Pat . . . I’d have to look at it.

WILLIAMS: Maybe Connie can look.

CONNIE ODUM-SOPER: Hendy or Hendry?

WILLIAMS: Hendry?

ODUM-SOPER: Harvey, Pat Harvey.

GROSS: Pat Harvey, yes. Pat Harvey. Pat Harvey.

WILLIAMS: Is that a man or a woman?

GROSS: A woman.

WILLIAMS: And that was about . . . well, a week after you . . .

GROSS: Yes, about a week or two after I started to work for her. It was . . .

WILLIAMS: Seventy-seven?

GROSS: Seventy-eight.

WILLIAMS: Seventy-eight.

GROSS: Seventy-eight, yes.

WILLIAMS: Did she seem to mind signing it?

GROSS: No. I never asked her to sign anything but that. I came in one day, and Margaret was there, and they gave me a whole stack of cookbooks. Nobody else got any, you know. I divided them up and gave some of the other help . . . is it Geraldine who was the lady that did her breakfast and cleaning? I gave her some. I believe I gave Val some. I gave one to my sister and one to my daughter, and then I kept a couple. I think I kept two of them. Then she gave me a book, and I wish now I'd had her sign them, because the one cookbook I kept has her recipe, and it does have her signature on it. But she gave me a book on the presidents and on the president's wives, and the White House, a series of books. I was thinking today, I sure wished I had asked her to sign those books.

She once told me, "Alice, you can have anything in this house you want." There were lots of things. The one thing that attracted me, up on her desk upstairs, as you come upstairs, was a picture. There's a paperweight

with her in all different kinds of hats. And I thought, I wish now I had asked her if I could have that, because . . . that always fascinated me. My eyes would always go to that. Or either one of the canes Mr. Truman had. It would just have been real neat to have one of those. But I never took anything from the house but those books that she gave me.

WILLIAMS: Why were they giving away cookbooks?

GROSS: I think she was just overstocked. Every time Margaret came, there was a housecleaning. [chuckling] It was funny sometimes to watch, because Mrs. Truman had her feelings and Margaret had her feelings, you know, and sometimes they didn't go . . . they clashed. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Did you get the feeling Mrs. Truman didn't like Margaret messing around in the house?

GROSS: No. It was funny, I will tell you this. One night Mrs. Truman was having a headache, and she kept having this headache, and Margaret said, "Well, why don't you take something for it?" So she marches out, and she goes into the kitchen, and she brings back this glass of water and a couple aspirins. And Mrs. Truman didn't want to take them. . . . She told me when Margaret left to go get them, she said, "Now you watch, she's going to throw this away and she's going to throw this away, and she's going to throw this away." So, when they came back, Margaret handed her these aspirins, and she went to turn to go out the door, and she says, "And I threw this away and this away and this away," and I got so tickled. [chuckling] Mrs. Truman didn't take the aspirins either. She threw them in the trash. [laughter]

It was funny, there were some funny incidents that happened. And we had such a relationship that when she had broken her hip, I had called and asked the Secret Service if we could come and see her, because we weren't going over to see her much then. I called and asked, and he said,

“Sure.” He says, “Just call ahead and let the nurses know that you’re coming so they can have her ready.” So we went over . . . I called the nurses, and they said, “Yeah, but she’s not going to talk. She doesn’t talk anymore, so she won’t be talking to you, but you’re welcome to come and see her.” So they had her on the porch in the back, and they had, of course, her back to the door. And when we came in, my husband had bought her a big bouquet, and when we came in, I went around this side on her left-hand side of her chair, and she just grinned. And then she started looking over her shoulder this way, just looking, and Ted came in, and her face just lit up. Just lit up! She talked and talked. She talked about Margaret, and she talked about the grandchildren. The nurses couldn’t get over how much she talked to us. And when we got ready to leave, and I think that’s what means so much to me, when we got ready to leave, she says, “I want the card.” And she took the card and was holding it in her hand, from the flowers. And that meant a lot to me because that showed me how much she cared for us. It wasn’t necessarily an employer-employee relationship. It was a friendship that we had developed, and I really appreciate that friendship we had.

WILLIAMS: Well, you’ve told me about a quilt. Could you explain that on the tape?

GROSS: Yes, on her ninety-fifth birthday . . . it was either her ninety-fifth or ninety-fourth birthday, but I think it was her ninety-fifth, we were having a get-together for her—and generally they did have a get-together for her—and my husband wanted to give her something real nice. His mother made quilts and sold them, so he bought a quilt for Mrs. Truman. He picked it out himself. It was beautiful. I’m not sure whether it was the bow tie pattern or just . . . I can’t remember the pattern, but I know it had pink in it, and it was beautiful, and we presented it to her. Of course, I have a picture of her with the package. She was so proud of that quilt, and it lay in her sitting room for a

long time. It laid on the divan there, and people would ask her where she got the quilt. Then somebody moved it upstairs. I don't know why, but they moved it upstairs. The last time I saw it, it was in the closet upstairs.

WILLIAMS: The big linen closet?

GROSS: Yes, the big linen closet.

WILLIAMS: And there was a pattern to it?

GROSS: Yes, there was a pattern to it. But I can't remember whether it was a bow tie pattern or just what pattern.

I remember an incident one night that she defended me. Like I told you, it's my responsibility to go out—and don't ask me the Secret Service name because I don't remember his name—to turn the lights out. And I went out and turned the light out. We put her to bed, and I decided . . . I'd go upstairs and go to bed and watch television up in her room. And I never went into Margaret's room. There's a couple incidents I'd like to share with you. But I went in and turned the light to let the Secret Service know I was going upstairs. I went upstairs and went to the bathroom and got myself all ready for bed, and I was in the bedroom just ready to go to bed when I heard steps on the steps. And I thought, "Well, who's coming up the steps?" I went out, and this gun faced me like this. [chuckling] And I thought, "What? What?" You know, it frightened me. And he said, "Did you lock that door downstairs?" I said, "No, I did not lock the door downstairs." For some reason it got locked and he thought somebody was in the house with us. Well, I was telling Mrs. Truman about the incident, and I guess she got onto him. He was not to come upstairs with me in the house, you know. But I can understand him, too.

But the funny thing was, oh, it was quite a while later, I went to bed one night, and Mrs. Truman woke me up. She needed something, and I went

downstairs to assist her. And it must have been about 2:00 in the morning, and I came upstairs, and I went into the bathroom. You know where the bathroom is located, and I came back to their bedroom and I saw this light flickering in Margaret's room. I thought, "What's in Margaret's room?" I don't ever go in there because I had my own television. And I peeked around . . . I was scared to death, but I peeked around the corner. The TV was going. I don't know how the TV got on. Still to this day I don't know how the TV . . . But I went downstairs and I thought, "What in the world is going on?" I went downstairs to the library and the Secret Service, and it happened to be this same guy. [chuckling] I said, "Were you upstairs?" and he said, "No, I wasn't upstairs." I said, "Well, somebody's upstairs because the TV's on, and I didn't turn it on." I said, "Will you come up and investigate?" [chuckling] We still don't know how the TV got on. [chuckling] It was really something.

WILLIAMS: You said you were allowed to sleep? You didn't have to stay up and watch her or anything?

GROSS: No, she had a bell she rang, a buzzer that came into the bedroom there, whenever she needed . . . Of course, when you stay with somebody at night, you don't sleep heavy, you sleep real light. And she would just ring for me when she needed assistance, so I would go down and help her.

WILLIAMS: Just some kind of electronic . . . ?

GROSS: Yes, it was a little button, I think, that she pushed, that came upstairs and rang for me.

WILLIAMS: Was that something the Secret Service had set up?

GROSS: It might have been, you know. I'm sure it probably was something they set up.

WILLIAMS: And which bedroom did you use?

GROSS: Their bedroom, her and Mr. Truman's bedroom.

WILLIAMS: Which is . . . ?

GROSS: Well, it'd be the one facing . . . it would be right . . . Margaret's faced west, and this was the one right behind hers.

WILLIAMS: Okay, the one with the sink in it?

GROSS: No, it's the one that has the twin beds. I don't think it has a sink in it. Does it have a sink? I don't remember the sink. It could be. [chuckling] Maybe that's because I never used the sink and that's why I don't remember it.

WILLIAMS: It's on the south side of the house.

GROSS: Yes, it is on the south side, and they had the twin beds in there. Right off from it was a dressing room, I think, that Mrs. Truman used, and she always had gifts that people gave her spread out on the bed. I do have something she gave me, too. She gave me a hankie, and I carried it at our wedding, because it was something old that she had given me. Across the hall was the room Mr. Truman dressed in. I remember one time the Secret Service was having trouble, and we had to go up into the attic for some reason I can't remember. That attic is so huge up there. I thought, "What a beautiful place for a studio apartment!" She had a beautiful marble table sitting there.

I was thinking of something else that happened that I was going to share with you. Oh, I remember one time I came to work, and she was asking me to put pictures up of the grandchildren on the wall. She had some pictures she wanted up, some new ones, so I was hanging them up. Somebody had sent her a two-pound box of Russell Stover's candy, and she says, "Alice, I want you to take and throw this away." I said, "Throw it away?" She says, "Yeah. They didn't know who sent it." So I had to throw it in the trash. She was always getting gifts from people. At Christmas she just was swamped with all kinds of food and stuff that the woman would

never, ever be able to use.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember anything in particular from a celebrity or anything like that?

GROSS: Oh, my . . .

WILLIAMS: Would it be flowers or food?

GROSS: Oh, she'd have flowers, and she'd have food. She'd get ham, she'd get cheese, and she'd get candies. She had a lady that brought her spaghetti and meatballs once in a while that she knew—really delicious spaghetti and meatballs. Then she had a man that brought her baked chicken. Now don't ask me, because I never met the people. I saw the lady with the spaghetti one time. Then she had a gentleman that brought her homemade chocolate ice cream. Now, Mrs. Truman loved her brownies, so we had to keep a can of brownies in the refrigerator for her all the time.

Every time I came in, I fixed her meals in the evening. She'd either want me to fry potatoes or fry cabbage or fry apples. She'd make her choice, but she always liked the way I fried them. And Mrs. LaMere always . . . called and said, "Well, how do you do it?" because they could never seem to fix it the way I fixed it for her. Also I made an orange delight cake that she liked real well. Like I said, we spent a lot of time talking and just enjoying one another, and enjoyed the porch. I remember when I quit I told her I was quitting to stay home with my husband, and she says, "You should." She felt women should be home with their husbands.

WILLIAMS: What other things did she like to eat?

GROSS: She liked asparagus. On Friday she generally had an egg, because she didn't eat meat on Fridays. She would have generally chicken or . . . My, chicken was her basic food. Like I said, she liked asparagus. She liked it when I was there, when I would fix her fried cabbage, or she'd have fried apples, or she would have fried potatoes. She always liked me to fix fried potatoes for her.

Tomatoes, sliced tomatoes. At lunch she generally would have a peanut butter sandwich or a sandwich. She said Mr. Truman loved peanut butter sandwiches. Almost every day he had a peanut butter sandwich for lunch because that was his meal.

WILLIAMS: Did she eat salads, fruit, things like that?

GROSS: Yes, she did. She ate fruit, and she ate salads. She was having a hard time . . . we were having a hard time getting her to eat there. We'd have to encourage her to eat because she just wasn't hungry. So we would think of things to fix to try to encourage her. And I'd do her grocery shopping for her.

WILLIAMS: We need to put on a new tape.

[End #4365; Begin #4366]

WILLIAMS: How much contact did you have with the Secret Service?

GROSS: Just at night when they'd come in. Very little. After Don died, I had very little contact with the Secret Service, not unless there was something . . . I got up in the night. Generally they stayed downstairs in the library, and I'd never see them. In fact, I'd never see them because I'd go on upstairs and wouldn't see them.

WILLIAMS: How often did Mrs. Truman buzz you during the night?

GROSS: Some nights she'd go all night, and then maybe one or two times through the night. It wasn't real bad.

WILLIAMS: So was it typical to be buzzed at least once?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: What was usually the reason?

GROSS: For her to go to the bathroom, because she needed assistance to the bathroom.

I remember one time giving her her bath. Of course, we'd lay the bath blanket on the bed. We had a stool for her, but she would not get in the

tub on the stool, so we gave her a bed bath, you know. And I put her on the bed and started bathing her. All of a sudden she screamed out, and I thought, “What did I do? What did I do?” [chuckling] I was so upset, I went in the bathroom and started crying, because it really upset me knowing I’d hurt her. I couldn’t figure out why, or what I’d done to her. So I came back in after I got her bathed, and I said, “Mrs. Truman, what did I do?” It upset me, and I was crying by that point. She just died laughing at me. I never did know what I did to her. She never did tell me what was wrong. [chuckling] The only thing I can think of, you know, Mrs. Truman had arthritis very, very bad. And the blanket, the way it was folded across her shoulders . . . The only thing I can think of is, the blanket might have been hurting her shoulders when we moved her. But she never did tell me. She just laughed at me. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: So did she take a bath every day?

GROSS: Yes, every day we gave her a bath.

WILLIAMS: When you say “we,” did you have help?

GROSS: No. I don’t know about the other girls. I say “we.” When I was there, I gave her a bath. I wasn’t there every day, except when Val was not there. And there was a period of time that I quit altogether and an R.N. took over, and she would call and let me know how Mrs. Truman was doing.

WILLIAMS: Did you have to help make sure she took her medicine and things like that?

GROSS: Yes, you did. You were in control of her medicine. Also, we’d make eggnogs and try to get her to drink eggnogs, to increase her appetite. We’d put a little bit of liquor in it to try to get her appetite . . . That’s what the doctor ordered, that we put a little of liquor in to try to get her appetite increased.

WILLIAMS: Which doctor was that?

GROSS: Dr. Graham.

WILLIAMS: Would you have much contact with him?

GROSS: No, not really. One time he came out and spent some time, and he asked me what each of us that worked there our titles were. And I told [him] person's title, and that was it.

WILLIAMS: Did he call frequently? Did you ever have to call him about any problem?

GROSS: I never had to. I never had to call. I know she started having light, mini-strokes, they said, but I never had to deal with that because I wasn't there in the daytime. At night she was always just fine.

WILLIAMS: What time would she go to bed?

GROSS: There were some nights she'd go to bed just shortly after I'd get there, and then some nights she'd sit up until 9:00, 9:30, maybe 10:00. It was according to whether she was reading, because she read quite a bit. She wasn't interested in TV, other than the Olympics. She loved ice skating, and she liked to watch the Olympic ice skating. But as far as that goes, it was mainly reading. She loved her mysteries.

WILLIAMS: Was there a TV in her room?

GROSS: No.

WILLIAMS: Where was the TV?

GROSS: We brought it in, a small TV, and put it on the dresser when she would want to watch it.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever sit in another room and watch TV?

GROSS: After she'd go to bed? Yes, I did sit in the piano room. When she'd go to bed I'd go in there, and that's when Don would come over and we'd watch television together. If Don wouldn't come over and I was tired, I'd go on up to my room and watch television.

WILLIAMS: I know you've been in the house since we've opened. Do any of the rooms look different from when you were there?

GROSS: Not really. I just noticed some things, like that one painting of the madonna is not there now. Really, it looks pretty much the same. Of course the table is set, where it wasn't set when I was there.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever use that china? You said you had the dinner . . .

GROSS: Yes, we did. One time we used it.

WILLIAMS: Are any of the chairs moved around from where they used to be, or anything like that?

GROSS: Not that I'm aware of right now. I've only been through once, and I'm not aware of it. In fact, I want to take him through.

WILLIAMS: We could probably arrange that. When you would get there, where would Mrs. Truman be in the house?

GROSS: When I first started working for her, she would be in the sitting room, sitting by that table over by the door as you go into the entry—you know, where Margaret's picture was, the foyer there. She had a picture of Margaret and the two kids on the wall. . . . That is a beautiful picture of Margaret. I made a statement to her one time. I said, "You know, Margaret's a beautiful woman." She said, "You think so?" I said, "Yes, she is. That's a very beautiful picture of Margaret." We spent a lot of time there, until she got to where she couldn't walk. And I remember when she first started having her trouble, I got down on the floor and moved her feet so . . . we could get her into the bedroom, because she was having such a time.

WILLIAMS: Did she have a walker?

GROSS: Yes, she did.

WILLIAMS: Was she in a wheelchair anytime that you were there?

GROSS: Yes, she finally went to the wheelchair.

WILLIAMS: So you were there during that progression from walking to the wheelchair.

GROSS: Yes. From then on she sat in her bedroom. But she would go out on the

porch with me. We'd go out on the porch. And I remember one time we went out there, and I went to turn the fan on, and the thing came off, the string. And I reached up and got a hold of hot wires. And you talk about jumping, I jumped! [laughter] She got so tickled.

It was really a joy to me to work for her. I feel like it's a job that the Lord gave me the experience to have, and I really appreciate that time to have been with her.

WILLIAMS: Did you talk much about religious things with her? I guess by that time she wasn't going to church.

GROSS: No, not so much. Her minister came to see her, you know, and brought her Communion. No, we didn't talk religion too much. She knew my husband was a minister. She knew about when he was called to the ministry. Like I said, she was interested in everything we had to do. I remember telling her just before I quit, "I was so scared to tell you I was getting married." She says, "And I thought you'd lost your mind, but you know, you've got a pretty good husband there." [chuckling] We had a real good relationship, really did.

WILLIAMS: When would she get up in the morning?

GROSS: When I worked for her she would get up before I'd leave. I would wake her up and get her up at 7:00.

WILLIAMS: And would you fix breakfast?

GROSS: No, not at the beginning I didn't. Geraldine, the colored lady, did.

WILLIAMS: Geraldine Peterson?

GROSS: I think that's it.

WILLIAMS: So then you would leave?

GROSS: I would leave and go to my job at the san[itarium]. I worked at the san in the office, and I worked at the RLDS auditorium as a guide on weekends. So I worked all the time—until I got married.

WILLIAMS: Where would you park?

GROSS: Around back. You'd go around back and park in the drive behind her car, in front of the garage.

WILLIAMS: Would you go down the alley or come in off of Truman Road?

GROSS: No, I'd go down the alley and come around that way. And every year, she'd give me a bouquet of lilacs out of the yard. I was to take a bouquet of lilacs to Ted every year, because every year in April he would go on a fishing trip for a week. And when he'd come back, we'd have the house all clean—and I say “we,” because she would always furnish the lilacs—and we'd have a big bouquet of lilacs for him on the table.

She also had a birthday party for him there, and his mother came. We had it on the back porch, and she got Ted a shirt, and his mom played the piano. She played “The Missouri Waltz,” and it was really nice. It was just the immediate family, her, and my husband, his mother, and myself, and I don't remember whether any of my children were there at the time. But my children had met her.

WILLIAMS: Do you know when this was, his birthday?

GROSS: Yes, this was his . . . his fifty-fourth birthday, I think. This was his birthday in, let's see, '79.

WILLIAMS: What day of the year?

GROSS: June 25, 1979.

WILLIAMS: That's three days before her wedding anniversary. Did she ever commemorate that?

GROSS: No, she didn't. She really didn't, that I can remember. I feel that . . . and we talked, I think she was ready to go. It hurt her to see everybody she knew go, and she was still lingering, you know. I think she was ready to go long before the Lord took her.

WILLIAMS: So she would say this, or you just surmised?

GROSS: Surmised in talking with her.

WILLIAMS: Did she have much company come by?

GROSS: Now, I can't speak so much in the daytime. When I was there in the daytime, not an awful lot. Like I said, the minister came. But I know before I started working . . . and when I was working days for her, it was after Val was really hurt, and she didn't have much company.

WILLIAMS: When you worked in the daytime, what was the routine?

GROSS: Well, we'd get her up of a morning, and we would wash her, get her face washed and get her prepared, and put a robe on her and sit her in her chair and fix her breakfast for her. And then we would give her her bath. And then she would read, and then we'd fix her lunch. And in the afternoon, she'd just sit there and read. Sometimes she would lay down and rest, but most of the time she sat up. She'd sit and read. And we just sat with her. In fact, I had to keep myself busy because it was hard to stay awake when you don't have anything to do. You just sit there, you know.

When Reverend had back surgery, Mrs. Truman asked me if I could find somebody to clean the downstairs for her. And I said, "Well, you don't have to do that. I'll do that in the evening when I'm there." And I'll never forget this, but this happened to be during the day, so he was still off. I was working days for some reason at that time, or it was still light, I remember. Anyway, I was dusting the piano, and took the candelabra off, and dusted under it, I set it back on it and turned around, and the thing fell off on the floor and broke those crystal pendulums all the way around. I thought, she wouldn't know if I put it back up. And I thought, "You can't do that!" So I went in and I gathered them up and I said, "Mrs. Truman, I've done something terrible." I said, "It's terrible." She said, "What did you do?" And

I told her. She kind of looked at me, and I said, “Where do I go to replace them?” She says, “New York.” And I said, “Oh, my! I’ll never make it to New York.” So what I did, I took them home and we glued them all back but about four, I think—however many are missing—because they’re still missing. [chuckling] Because that’s one thing I checked out when I went in.

WILLIAMS: So that was you?

GROSS: That was me. [laughter] That was me. And she was aware of it, too.

WILLIAMS: And we know who to send the bill to.

GROSS: Yes. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: How long was Valeria LaMere out with her broken ankle or foot? Was it days, weeks, months?

GROSS: You know, I really can’t remember. I know it was a week I worked . . . It seemed like it was a hundred-and-some-odd hours straight before they got somebody in to take over for me. Straight through. I don’t remember how long Val was off.

WILLIAMS: And how much did you see Reverend Hobby?

GROSS: I saw him at that birthday party. I don’t remember seeing him very often, because I wasn’t there that much in the day. I saw Geraldine more.

WILLIAMS: Do you know what he did?

GROSS: He did the yard work and the downstairs cleaning. Geraldine did the upstairs cleaning and the laundry and the breakfast, fixed the breakfast and I think the noon meal.

WILLIAMS: Was there any other regular help around the house when you were there?

GROSS: No.

WILLIAMS: So just Geraldine, Reverend Hobby, you, and Valeria.

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And the Secret Service.

GROSS: Yes, and the Secret Service.

WILLIAMS: Well, you've mentioned your wedding, and the wedding party was in. What did you do? How long were you there that day?

GROSS: Oh, we were there about half an hour. We didn't want to tire her out. And like I said, my husband's father from Florida and his stepmother were up, Mrs. and Mrs. Herman Pikert, and then Marge O'Hallen from Chicago was in. That was my mother-in-law's sister-in-law that came for the wedding. This was the first time I had met them. And then there was . . . I believe my daughter was in at that time. She met my aunt, my mother's twin, who is like a mother to us, and she, of course, met my kids. I had pictures of my son in front of her fireplace. I don't now. I did at one time. And she met my daughter and son-in-law.

WILLIAMS: Did you just sit and visit?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Where was it in the house?

GROSS: In the sitting room.

WILLIAMS: Is that the . . . not the piano room?

GROSS: No, it's the room where Mr. Truman's picture is, the big room.

WILLIAMS: Were your in-laws impressed?

GROSS: Yes. In fact, the extra painting, my father-in-law has died since my husband died, and Mrs. O'Hallen went . . . they're in charge of the estate. They went down, and they took the picture. And she said, "I took that picture." And I really wanted it because I wanted one for each of my children, and I didn't have the nerve to say, "No, you can't have it." So she's got it in Chicago. And I wonder what's going to happen to the picture when something happens to her. Because my kids would treasure it, you know, because of being from here and having known Mrs. Truman and they would like to have it. Where

somebody else wouldn't have that treasure, you know, she did because she'd met Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: What were holidays like?

GROSS: You know, they were quiet. They were quiet times. Christmas was real nice. We were always getting gifts and having to put stuff away in the freezer. I'll never forget the first time I took [chuckling] stuff down to the freezer, the first Christmas that I was there, and I opened it up and some of the meat was green. It had been in there *so long*, it was just green. We had to throw it away. So she was just overcome with food that she really didn't need.

WILLIAMS: Was that down in the basement?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: What do you remember about the basement and what it looked like?

GROSS: Scary. [laughter] Scary. It was. I went down there to the freezer . . . Geraldine's the one that went down to the basement most generally, [chuckling] for the laundry.

I went upstairs, and you know there's a little room over the kitchen that comes down into the kitchen. And I guess that was the maid's quarters. I don't know what the room was used for. And I could tell you some stories about what was related to me about things that they felt. There was one of the girls that worked there, and I won't give her name out, but she said one night that she was sitting in the kitchen and the Secret Service had been there and they had left. And she said she was sitting there in the kitchen, and all of a sudden she heard some steps upstairs, and they came down the steps. She said she never did see anybody. Now, I never had those experiences happen to me. The only one I had was the television. And then she said one night she was in playing the piano, and she felt two personages come and stand there, a man and woman. She said she really felt it was Mrs. Truman's folks that

came and stood there while she played.

Now, like I said, I never had those experiences. Like I said, I only had the one with the television, [chuckling] and we never did figure it out. The only thing I could figure out on the television, when Geraldine was up there dusting, that she might have turned it on. But I don't know why I didn't see it when I went up to go to bed, you know. But in the middle of the night it was on.

WILLIAMS: Was it ever just spooky for you to be upstairs alone in this big house?

GROSS: Only that time.

WILLIAMS: So you never felt uncomfortable?

GROSS: Never, really. Never really felt uncomfortable. I felt at home.

WILLIAMS: And safe?

GROSS: Yes. With the Secret Service there, we were safe. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: I suppose.

GROSS: Yes, they had cameras, you know, by the porch back there, too, where they could see around if anybody was snooping around the house. They had cameras on the yard.

WILLIAMS: When was the first time you met Margaret Truman Daniel?

GROSS: You know, I started in June. I can't remember whether it was . . . It seemed like Margaret came that fall. I can't remember dates. She brought Thomas with her. The first time I met her she brought Thomas, the youngest grandson, with her.

WILLIAMS: What was your impression of her?

GROSS: She was very, very cordial to me. Very nice. I never had any problems with Margaret. Like I said, I got a bigger kick out of her and her mom, just sitting back and watching them. And they got along. They just . . . you know, like mothers and daughters don't always agree on things. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Did you sense that Margaret was strong-willed?

GROSS: Yes, very much strong-willed.

WILLIAMS: Would you say that about Mrs. Truman?

GROSS: Yes. They were a lot alike.

WILLIAMS: In other ways?

GROSS: I think they were a lot alike in their . . . strong-will-ness. I can't say how Margaret really is because I never really spent a lot of time with Margaret. Like I've lived with Mrs. Truman, so I can't say how Margaret really would be. I know the first time I met Mr. Daniel it was really nice meeting him for the first time. And he knew all about me. He said, "I already know all about you, you know." And I enjoyed meeting him, and I only met him that night, the first night . . . I don't remember how long they were there. Margaret always came in May when it was Mr. Truman's birthday. And that's what I'm wanting to say, the first time I met him was then, but it seems like she came before then, that I'd met her before then, but I can't say for sure.

WILLIAMS: Would she usually come at Christmas time or on any other special occasions?

GROSS: No. She always talked to Mrs. Truman. Every Sunday they'd call. Mrs. Truman called, or she'd call. They always talked to each other on Sunday, and they talked on the holidays, but I don't remember her ever being there at Christmas time when I was there. And the only grandson that came the whole time I was there was Thomas.

WILLIAMS: Would Margaret stay there all the time?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Or would she go, come and go?

GROSS: Oh, she'd come and go to do things. Like she'd go into the Crown Center, and then she'd have activities. But she always was there at night with her mother. She always fixed her mother's meal at night when she'd come. She

always did the cooking, unless she had an activity that wouldn't allow her to be there. But generally she'd fix the meal, and I'd just sit in the library. I stayed out of the room when they were together and let them visit.

WILLIAMS: Did Mrs. Truman talk much about Mr. Truman? Or did they talk about him when Margaret was there?

GROSS: Not that I'm aware of. In my presence they didn't talk so much about him. Not unless we asked a question, she didn't talk a lot about him. I would read books, and then we would talk. We talked about the congress and the senate sometimes and . . .

WILLIAMS: Current events?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Would she read the newspaper?

GROSS: Oh, yes.

WILLIAMS: Did she have opinions on things?

GROSS: Sometimes. I remember once she got a *Ladies' Home Journal*, and you know they got to the point where every president had a scandal of some kind, something they could find bad about them, dig up. And I remember this *Ladies' Home Journal* had every president in there but Truman. And they couldn't find anything wrong with Truman. The article said the most they could find was that he washed his own underwear, the most scandalous thing they could find. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Did she say that was true?

GROSS: No, I didn't even ask her about it. [chuckling] I read Margaret's books, some of her books. I want to read her book on Mrs. Truman. I have not had the opportunity to read that. I understand it's very, very good. I had the freedom to use the library, you know, to read as much as I could.

WILLIAMS: Would you inquire about objects that you were curious about?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember anything in particular, any of the knickknacks or paintings or anything?

GROSS: The paintings, Grandma Moses's paintings, Winston Churchill's. They were the only one to have a Winston Churchill, besides his daughter, in the United States. And I think it's still hanging, isn't it? It isn't?

WILLIAMS: Margaret has it.

GROSS: Margaret has it? I wondered if that was it when I went in, because . . . Did she take the Grandma Moses one, too?

WILLIAMS: She also had the madonna.

GROSS: Oh, she does? She has that?

WILLIAMS: Well, I think she has since given it back to the National Archives. They're trying to work on it.

GROSS: Oh. Well, I'm glad she did that. I'm glad she did that, because it was deteriorating, and it really needed the care. And that's what Don said, it really needed some care to preserve it.

WILLIAMS: Did she talk about the jade or the ivory or any of those?

GROSS: You know, she probably did because I asked her about it, but I couldn't tell you. She would just tell me when they got it and how they got it. We talked about . . . a little bit about the White House. We talked about when . . . they tried to assassinate him, and the feelings that she had. She was very traumatized by that. And also that she really didn't want him to run as president. [chuckling] You know, that wasn't really what she wanted, but that's what he did, and she supported him.

WILLIAMS: Did she seem to like her experience as a first lady?

GROSS: I think she did. I think she gained a lot of insight. She was really crazy about her family. I mean, her grandchildren and Margaret were the light of her . . .

and Mr. Truman were really important to her. She'd tell me how they used to go fishing. She liked to fish, but he didn't, so he would read while they fished. And she liked baseball, and she liked the farm.

CONNIE OODUM-SOPER: Did she?

GROSS: Yes, she liked the farm. And it was just little things that she's told me. And there are some things that I can't tell that she told me, [chuckling] so I won't.

WILLIAMS: What did she like about the farm?

GROSS: I think the country. The country was the main thing she liked.

WILLIAMS: Did she ever talk about how Independence had changed through her life?

GROSS: No, she didn't, not to me.

WILLIAMS: Say things were going downhill or uphill?

GROSS: No, she didn't. I know she watched the politics, what was going on, who was running for president and all at that time, you know, at the time.

WILLIAMS: You mentioned you would use the library. Would she ever be in the library reading?

GROSS: No.

WILLIAMS: In the daytime, or even in the evenings when you were there, would she be doing any kind of correspondence or office paperwork?

GROSS: No, the secretary did most of the correspondence for her. She would read, you know, but the secretary would do most of her correspondence.

WILLIAMS: Was the secretary from the Truman Library?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Do you know who that was? The first name?

GROSS: I sure don't.

WILLIAMS: Okay. Was the house warm in the wintertime?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Warm in the summertime?

GROSS: [chuckling] It was warm in the summertime. It wasn't too bad in the winter, but in the summertime it was warm. We'd turn the fan on, which helped, you know, when we were in the other part of the house. But she had an air conditioner in the library, and one in her bedroom, if I'm not mistaken.

WILLIAMS: Did you have any extra heaters in the wintertime, anything?

GROSS: Just the stove in the kitchen, and that was about it.

WILLIAMS: And you would use that?

GROSS: It would be lit, yes.

WILLIAMS: Did you have to light it?

GROSS: Yes, I think I did. I think it was lit when I would get there at night, so I wouldn't have to worry about it.

WILLIAMS: And you mentioned something about she gave a check to your husband to go buy an air conditioner.

GROSS: Yes, just gave him a blank check and told him . . . They had talked about what kind she wanted, and told him where they were going to go buy it. She knew where he was buying it and everything, but she trusted him.

WILLIAMS: Was it Sears or someplace?

GROSS: No, he went out to . . . it was Dolgin's at the time. That's where he bought it.

WILLIAMS: And which room was that for?

GROSS: The library.

WILLIAMS: Was there an air conditioner already in there?

GROSS: Yes, and it went out. It quit working.

WILLIAMS: So he went and got a new one.

GROSS: A new one for her.

WILLIAMS: I wonder what they thought when he came in with a check from Bess Truman.

GROSS: I don't know, I wasn't with him when he did that. [chuckling] I never thought of that.

WILLIAMS: I wonder if they were suspicious. [chuckling] “I have a blank check here from Bess Truman . . .”

GROSS: You know, I never really thought of Mrs. Truman as first lady. To me she was always a friend, and so . . . and it was the relationship we had. I told her once, “You’re more like my grandmother.” I just never thought of her much as a first lady.

WILLIAMS: Did she seem to like it that way?

GROSS: Yes, she did. We had a lot of good times together. So many, many things we shared and enjoyed together, and just talking.

WILLIAMS: What words would you use to describe her, her personality and character?

GROSS: She could be funny. She could be funny, witty. I think she was a caring, gentle, but strong-willed woman, and had a mind of her own.

WILLIAMS: When was she funny? The public impression, I think, is that she was pretty sour.

GROSS: Pretty sour. No, she wasn’t. Just like the time I thought I’d hurt her, and she laughed at me, and the time I broke the pieces and she laughed at me. You know, she was just . . . she could have a witty side of her. I think she was when she was young. I think Mrs. Truman was very witty, and people didn’t see that. Just knowing her and the things she liked, like baseball and fishing and things like that. She’d have to be witty to enjoy those things.

WILLIAMS: Was she generally upbeat, cheery?

GROSS: Yes. [chuckling] I can see her laugh, because there were times she’d laugh—and, you know, she had trouble so she’d have a hankie here—and we’d get tickled because she’d get to laughing, we’d get to laughing about something. I remember one night I was giving her her medicine, and it got hung and she couldn’t get it to go down, and she couldn’t get it to go down. I tried everything I could think of. Finally, I called the R.N., and I said, “What do I

do?” And she told me some things to do, and it didn’t work. We still couldn’t get that pill to go down. So finally I thought of something, and I went in the kitchen and I brought this little saucer with a slice of bread on it. And I said, “Mrs. Truman, take this and eat.” And it went right down. I thought of a fish bone is what I was thinking about. And she started eating that piece of bread, and eating and eating. I said, “Are you hungry?” She said, “No, but whose bread is this?” And I said, “Well, it’s your bread.” [chuckling] A few things like that. I said, “You need to eat your bread more often.” This was at night just before bedtime. So she could be witty. No, I see her as a very witty, beautiful lady. Very beautiful. I have nothing but high respect for Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: Witty, but not like telling jokes all the time or cut-up like that.

GROSS: Hmm-mm, she had a sense of humor. She was always concerned about us and our families. She liked to hear about our families. I’d talk mainly about my grandchildren and about my husband, and what they were doing, you know. The good things.

WILLIAMS: I think we’ll put on a shorter tape, and I just have a few more questions.

GROSS: Okay.

[End #4366; Begin #4367]

GROSS: The library was so small that it wasn’t too long after I had gone to work with her that she wasn’t able to walk on a walker. She went in the hospital and came out with a wheelchair and wasn’t able to walk, so she never went to the library, that I was aware of, when I was there. She mainly sat in the sitting room. Then it got to the point she just stayed in her bedroom. But we could get her out on the porch. And I loved it. We spent a lot of time out on the porch.

ODUM-SOPER: In the back?

GROSS: As much as I could, I'd encourage her to that back porch. And we'd always see that her flowers were planted, her flowers were taken care of there. She would eat out there. That was it. We would fix her meals, and she'd have her meal out on the porch too. She liked it out there.

WILLIAMS: So, if you weren't eating out on the back porch, it would have been . . . ?

GROSS: It would have been in her bedroom. Or the sitting room.

WILLIAMS: While she was in bed, or sitting . . .

GROSS: No, sitting in her chair. She had a chair in the bedroom, and she'd sit in the chair there. They bought her a recliner, and she never did like that recliner. So it wound up the help sat in the recliner, and she sat in her chair [chuckling], her faithful old chair that she liked.

WILLIAMS: It was like an armchair?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And when Margaret was there, they would eat together?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: In the dining room or someplace else?

GROSS: I cannot remember them eating in the dining room together. I seem to want to say they sat up in the sitting room, and that's where they would eat, you know. I really don't remember. I visualize them sitting in the sitting room and eating.

WILLIAMS: Did you decorate at all for Christmas?

GROSS: Did I decorate for Christmas?

WILLIAMS: Or did the staff decorate?

GROSS: They didn't have much out for Christmas, from what I remember. No, not much. They had flowers, poinsettias.

WILLIAMS: Just sitting?

GROSS: Yes, sitting around. I don't remember a tree. I don't remember ever having a

tree, you know, or really decorating like they would decorate. I'll tell you what was really surprising is the house wasn't what I expected. I think that most people, even when I took the tour that day, found it wasn't what they expected when they walked in.

WILLIAMS: What did you expect?

GROSS: I personally expected a real elaborate place, which in its day probably was elaborate, you know. But I think that's what the people expect when they go in there, and . . . it's not. It's just not. It's an old home. And I didn't know for a long time that Margaret's the one that decorated the kitchen. She's the one that did all the decorating in the kitchen.

WILLIAMS: How did you find that out?

GROSS: She told me.

WILLIAMS: She did?

GROSS: Yes, one time when she was there.

WILLIAMS: Did she just say, "I decorated it"?

GROSS: Well, I was in the kitchen talking to her, and I don't remember what brought it up, but she told me she was the one that decorated it. And Don said that Mrs. Truman was always out in the kitchen. They had their breakfast in there at that little breakfast table, and he'd come over and they'd have breakfast together.

WILLIAMS: Back when I asked what she liked to eat, I didn't ask what she liked to drink.

GROSS: She had her coffee in the morning. You know, as many times as I fixed it, I can't say for sure. [chuckling] I can tell you the main things she liked, but as far as her drink, I never really paid that much attention. I know coffee in the morning.

WILLIAMS: Was there ever anything like a glass of milk always before bed?

GROSS: I think so, yes. No, not before bed. She'd have milk sometimes. If I

remember correctly, she had milk sometimes at meals.

WILLIAMS: And I guess this was right before we changed another tape, you said you would do the shopping for groceries?

GROSS: Yes, I'd do the grocery shopping for her. When I worked days for her, I'd go over to . . . it used to be the old Milgram's store, and do her shopping.

And I remember the first time I had to buy liquor. It was hard for me, because I don't drink and I'm not used to it. [chuckling] And it was a struggle for me. And she was so gracious because she said, "Alice, if you don't want to do it, we'll have the Secret Service do it." I said, "No, I'm doing the grocery shopping anyway. I'll go in." And the first time I walked into the liquor store, and didn't know anything about liquor and I was supposed to get a brand, and the man wouldn't help me. I was just furious. [chuckling] Because for one thing, I was afraid somebody in the church would see me, and I thought, "They're going to think I'm out here drinking." [laughter] And sure enough, I ran into somebody in the church, but they knew who I worked for. [laughter]

However it was fine, because she did graciously say that she wouldn't make me buy the liquor. And I told her . . . that it wasn't for her. It was for when she had guests. The only time Mrs. Truman had a drink was when they would put a little bit of the whiskey in her eggnog to try to get her to eat. They were trying to increase her appetite.

WILLIAMS: Were you ever there the day that somebody would come to visit, like a dignitary, or President Carter?

GROSS: No, I wasn't. Val was the one that was there, I think. Val always went out to dinner with her. They would always go out to lunch. When I started working days, I did not take her out to lunch. We didn't do that.

WILLIAMS: So Mrs. Truman was still getting out on occasion?

GROSS: Yes, she'd go to lunch.

WILLIAMS: Where would she go?

GROSS: She'd go to the beauty shop and to lunch on Wednesdays. And they would go down sometimes to Ernie's at Sugar Creek.

WILLIAMS: Is that a restaurant?

GROSS: Yes. I've been there once. I didn't know where it was, but I've been there once since. And there's a place out on Blue Ridge, a restaurant out there they used to go to. Those are the only two I could tell you. They'd tell me. When I worked days . . . We'd go to the beauty shop, and we'd just come home. We wouldn't go out for meals.

WILLIAMS: So you have been to the beauty shop with her?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Would you drive?

GROSS: The Secret Service drove us.

WILLIAMS: Whose car?

GROSS: Her car, if I remember correctly. Yes, her car.

WILLIAMS: The big green one?

GROSS: Yes. If I remember correct, that's the one they took, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Would you drive your own car to the grocery store?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: I guess she'd give you money ahead of time?

GROSS: Yes, she'd give me money ahead of time to go, a grocery list and money.

WILLIAMS: Was it pretty much up to you what you bought?

GROSS: We'd sit down together and make out the list. She would ask what I felt we needed in the kitchen. If asparagus was in and she wanted asparagus, she would say, "I'd like some asparagus," and we'd have asparagus or something like that. She liked tomatoes, and she liked tomatoes with dressing on it.

Instead of a salad, she wanted her tomatoes sliced and dressing put on it. She liked cottage cheese.

WILLIAMS: Was she watching her weight?

GROSS: No, I don't think so. [chuckling] She'd lost a lot of weight. She had really gotten thin.

WILLIAMS: While you were there, did you ever have any problems with the house, as far as the maintenance, like the pipes freezing or drains clogging up, or anything like that?

GROSS: No.

WILLIAMS: Any storms where limbs would come down?

GROSS: No, I know she lost trees on that one side, beautiful trees. Those trees there, all along there, were—

WILLIAMS: Which side was this?

GROSS: It would be the north side of the house. There was a row of trees there. They're gone now. While I was there, somebody ran into the fence, twice, and they had to redo the fence.

WILLIAMS: Just run off the road?

GROSS: Yes. One time I came home from work and Val told me that a man tried to climb over the fence and get into the place. They took him off to the mental health place. I remember one night her and I were sitting and talking, and . . . I always sat at her feet. That way we were close, you know, and it was a closeness we had. So I'd always sit at her feet and talk with her.

WILLIAMS: You mean, on the floor?

GROSS: Yes, I'd sit on the floor and talk with her.

WILLIAMS: She likes to do that [referring to Odum-Soper].

GROSS: I do. I even do that my clients today. I go and sit at their feet and talk with them. I was sitting there, and we were just talking up a storm. And the next

thing we knew, people were moving down by the house and the window. They were trying to see in the south window, and trying to look in at her. That upset her because that was her privacy, you know, and they were trying to look in on her privacy. It disturbed her having the public trying to look in on her.

WILLIAMS: Would reporters ever call, or anything like that?

GROSS: Not while I was there. Like I said, mainly I was there at night.

WILLIAMS: So it was pretty quiet.

GROSS: Mm-hmm, it was pretty quiet.

WILLIAMS: Did you know Mrs. Truman's sister-in-law next door?

GROSS: I met Mrs. Wallace. I have her picture there with Mrs. Truman's birthday. This is just a little snapshot. There's Mrs. Wallace. There's the head of the Secret Service. I cannot remember his name. Lock . . . ?

WILLIAMS: Bob Lockwood.

GROSS: Bob Lockwood. That's what I thought. . . . And that's his wife, and this was Betty Buckingham that worked for her for a while. This was her beautician and her husband. This is Geraldine, this is Reverend down here. But I don't know who these two back here were. I don't remember who they were.

WILLIAMS: And this is which birthday? There's something on the cake.

GROSS: That's the cake.

WILLIAMS: Ninety-five, it looks like.

GROSS: Ninety-fifth birthday. Yes, so this was the ninety-fourth we gave her her quilt. And her ninety-fifth, she was in the blue here with my husband and I.

WILLIAMS: It looks like she was all dressed up.

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And you had gifts for her?

GROSS: Yes, we had gifts for her, and cake. We always tried to celebrate on her birthday.

WILLIAMS: It looks like a chocolate cake.

GROSS: Yes. She loved chocolate. The other cake she liked was an orange delight cake that I would make. She loved it, and I'd fix it for her.

WILLIAMS: How often would you see May Wallace?

GROSS: Well, at activities, and she would come in and see Mrs. Truman. I don't know how often. At night . . . When Margaret was there she'd come over. I just can't say how many times she would come during the time there. I'd seen her a few times when I was there.

WILLIAMS: Did you know any other members of the family?

GROSS: No.

WILLIAMS: What other things should I ask?

ODUM-SOPER: I have one last question. I have catalogued the things that were in the little spice cabinet next to the stove on the north wall in the kitchen. In one of the drawers, there were a stack of ten pieces of tin foil, bent so they were a little bit concave. And I wondered if they were there to . . . Sometimes don't you put that over an eye patch? Would it have been used that way?

GROSS: Well, I don't know.

ODUM-SOPER: I thought maybe you as a nurse might have put them there.

GROSS: No, that had to be something that maybe the R.N.'s did after I left.

ODUM-SOPER: There was no spice in the spice cabinet. All the drawers were used for rubber bands and other things.

GROSS: It might have been something that Upjohn's nurses did. . . after they came in. Because after I quit, Upjohn came in. Mary Leutzinger was an R.N. for a while. Then she had one that was called "Peaches."

ODUM-SOPER: Did you ever use . . . Off that subject, did you ever use the so-called

plate warmer in the dining room, that marble-topped grate-like thing that was over the heater, at all?

GROSS: Hmm-mm.

ODUM-SOPER: Did you ever open it?

GROSS: Hmm-mm. I never really snooped around much. [chuckling] She gave me a statue that sat on the kitchen sink. Is it still there, of Mr. Truman? It's plastic. A little old statue about this tall.

ODUM-SOPER: In the sink?

GROSS: And it sat in the kitchen on the sink.

WILLIAMS: Up above, on the ledge?

GROSS: Yes, on the ledge. And she said, "You take that to Ted." Well, some problems developed, and I brought it back. I took it, but I brought it back because I did not want to be accused of stealing, so I brought it back. I told my husband, "I'd rather us not have anything than to have . . ." Because there were some problems that some things were missing, and they were concerned about . . .

WILLIAMS: Since you were cooking, there's a spice rack up on the wall, and all the bottles are out of it now.

GROSS: Oh, they are?

WILLIAMS: Were there bottles in it, do you remember?

ODUM-SOPER: Above the table in front of the pantry.

WILLIAMS: On that little work table?

ODUM-SOPER: Where the blender is?

WILLIAMS: Do you remember there being bottles in there, or using the spices?

GROSS: I can honestly say I don't remember. Because, really, mainly the spices I used were salt and pepper, what little dab of salt she could have, you know. There weren't a lot of spices that I used. Margaret was the one that did the fancy

cooking. I did plain cooking. I'm from Arkansas, and my cooking was plain.
[chuckling]

WILLIAMS: She probably liked it that way.

GROSS: [chuckling] Yes, she did. She liked it very much that way.

WILLIAMS: I haven't asked, I think, when you left exactly. Was it 1980?

GROSS: Yes. I was trying to remember. It was 1980, I think that was, when I left there, because Upjohn came in.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember if it was the spring, summer, fall?

GROSS: I want to say it was late summer. That's what I want to say, but I'm not sure. It seemed like it was around August.

ODUM-SOPER: Were the grapes ready to pick? [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Did you ever do anything with the grapes out there on the back porch?

GROSS: I never bothered. No, never bothered the grapes. All I ever took were the lilacs that she would just give a big bouquet for Ted, and that's all I ever bothered in the yard. I never bothered the grapes.

WILLIAMS: People want to pick them now.

GROSS: Do they? [laughter] When I took the tour, I had the hardest time was not to touching anything, because I wanted to touch the sink in the kitchen for some reason. I stood at that sink so many times and washed dishes. [laughter] So that's what I found hard: not being able to touch that sink.

WILLIAMS: Which dishes would you use everyday, from day to day?

GROSS: The ones in the kitchen.

WILLIAMS: The ones that are set out now?

GROSS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: The Wedgewood?

GROSS: Uh-huh, the ones in the kitchen. And we'd fix her toast in the morning, and her coffee, and she'd have jelly, and she'd have an egg, or sometimes she'd

have cereal. And like I said, lunch she generally had just her sandwich, or maybe she'd have some cottage cheese and fruit or . . .

WILLIAMS: Could you describe how your life would have been different if you hadn't had this experience?

GROSS: [pause] I don't know how it would be different. I feel like it's been such a blessing, such a blessing to me to have been privileged to have been her companion. I call it companion. It's memories that I hope to get down on paper one of these days for my grandchildren. That's who I want to reserve all this for, is my grandchildren.

[chuckling] I didn't care for Mr. Truman until I went and lived in their home and became acquainted with the man and the family. And I have such a great respect for him, a tremendous respect. And I feel if we had a president today like that, we would not be in the mess we're in. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: I think I'm about out of tape, so I'll say thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW